

Harness and Hitching-Post



Margaret Busbee Shipp

FRED MURCHISON was riding along the country road which led to Dillsboro. Something of the fine enthusiasm which had possessed him when he first came back to his boyhood's home, and which had so unaccountably evaporated in the two months that had passed since then, was again stirring in his veins.

"This has them all beat to a finish!" he said aloud, contentedly.

"This" referred to a field of soft, yellow-brown broom-straw and a wide sweep of woods, where the oaks were still green, though sourwood and dogwood flamed here and there a message of autumn. "Them" included in a vast dump-heap the Pyramids, the Nile, and the Bosphorus.

The eighteen years he had spent in Turkey and Egypt had intensified his loyalty to his Southern home. Sometimes it seemed a dream to him that he, "little Freddy Murchison," should be riding a thoroughbred horse along the old road to the swimming-hole. His duties as an office-boy had once made it an occasional Mecca, instead of the daily summer pastime it was to Blink Peters and Pogeey King. Leisure to do as he liked had been the rarest luxury in his boyhood, and he had determined to win it in his manhood.

Now, at forty-five, Murchison need never work again unless he chose, while Peters

was eking out his profits from his hardware store by being mayor of Coopertown, and King's tendency to sprees might be explained by the fact that a long wait between clients is apt to lead to a short period between drinks.

The thought of Peters and King distracted him from the gentle beauty of the day. Murchison's perceptions were too keen not to recognize that they resented his success. When he had impulsively greeted the former as "old Blink," the mayor had suggested that as nobody else would remember that fool nickname, it was better to cut it out. From what Murchison learned afterward of Peters's leniency toward blind tigers, he saw that the word "Blink" might carry a sinister suggestion if its use should become general. So he dropped it; but in some inexplicable way all the boyhood intimacy seemed to drop away with it.

Murchison was at a loss to account for Pogeey's aloofness. The incident of his own passing calf-love for Susie Shepherd, now Mrs. King, had so entirely slipped from his memory that it did not occur to him that a woman never forgets a man who has made love to her. Whether his later years lead him to the Supreme Court bench or to the electric chair, he remains static as a discarded suitor. Hundreds of times

poor King had heard his wife say, "If I had married Fred I might be wearing sables"—or riding in an automobile, or indulging in any particular luxury that happened to appeal to her at the moment.

"Not that I ever regret it," she would add in a martyred tone, as she went on washing the dishes or patching Sammy's trousers; but King would have been superhuman in magnanimity if he had rejoiced when the wandering Fred settled down in Coopertown to make his imagined riches present and concrete.

Murchison checked his horse in front of the Old Church to see how his well was progressing. It was his plan to help the county in inconspicuous ways at first—not with the blare of a benefactor, but as a friend who stood ready to serve the people of his birthplace. He had determined to keep out of neighborhood disputes and political brawls, and to live among his own people in honorable tranquillity.

He had noticed that the country people often stopped at the Old Church to eat dinner under the big white oaks, but there was no place where they could water their horses or get a drink without climbing down a long, rocky hill to a spring. A good well, with a trough for the horses, would prove a daily convenience; and Murchison had allowed the best well-digger in the county to charge him twice what he would have charged any one else, in his zeal to get the work done.

His happy mood lingered as he neared the court-house at Dillsboro. The long ride in the clear October air had chased away all the small vexations, and his homecoming project was seen again in its first light of attraction. There had been times in the past month when he had unwillingly recalled the words of the presiding genius of the great corporation which he had so long served:

"Any man's place can be filled, Fred, but it's against my judgment to fill yours. Go back to your old home for three months, and I'll put Creech on the job temporarily—though you understand the market in a way he never will. At the end of three months you can decide whether you're in earnest about this back-to-the-old-home proposition. My opinion is that you'll be more work-hungry than you now think you are leisure-loving."

"I've never had enough experience with leisure to know whether I like it or not,"

laughed Murchison. "The idea of being able to pick up a book and read in the forenoon attracts me."

"A man doesn't *begin* to like reading after he's forty," replied the big man dryly. "However, you'll find plenty of time for it—about the second month of your stay in Coopertown!"

Murchison did not see the presiding genius again, but at the beginning of the second month at home some books arrived, with the great man's card.

"I'd rather have one good talk with you about the market than read every volume in the Congressional Library," he wrote back ungratefully.

But his determination not to go back into harness was unshaken. He was rich, he had no near relatives, and the leisurely life of a country gentleman had always appealed to his fancy. Having inherited the old homestead, he had been busy superintending the immediately necessary repairs, though he contemplated tearing it down and building a big place later.

Murchison had also bought back his grandfather's farm of several hundred acres. The soil was exhausted, and Smathers, who had been farming it, had been glad enough to sell it through an agent. Now he was loud in his claims of having "sold it for a song," since he learned that the real purchaser was a rich man with a sentiment for the place which might have been turned into dollars.

There was trouble about a boundary-line, and Murchison's mission to the court-house was to look up his grandfather's deed. He remembered as a boy the rock wall with the long hedge of pale-pink altheas. "Roses of Sharon," his grandmother had called them. Old Mrs. Abby-house, on the adjoining farm, was insisting that her boundary-line extended beyond the wall and the hedge.

Smathers was loud in pious regrets. He was a poor man himself, he declared, but he would have been glad enough to give a few feet of land and a row of bushes to an old lady who had her heart set on them.

"Of course," he added, "the way the rich keep rich is by holding fast to all they can grab!"

II

As Murchison tied his horse to a dilapidated hitching-post in front of the court-

house, he determined to give the county a good modern one, and made a note of it in his memorandum-book. He was in a mood of pleasant kindness to all the world as he went into the office of the register of deeds. He found the Abbyhouse deed just as he had expected. The land was his; but a certain revulsion of feeling stirred him.

After all, Mrs. Abbyhouse was old and provincial, and she had suffered from life imprisonment in a narrow nature. Perhaps it would be doing more honor to his grandmother's memory if he yielded the point to another old lady and gave her the land in dispute.

"Mrs. Abbyhouse's nephew was in here two weeks ago, looking up the same deed," remarked the register carelessly.

"So they know they were wrong about the boundary, then?"

"Yes," smiled the register. "But he said he reckoned you'd have to give in to the general feeling that old Mrs. Abbyhouse has sort of earned those bushes. You see, every time there's a funeral in the summer she makes a cross out of those pink roses of Sharon."

"I guess that settles it," Murchison replied. "She may keep them."

A hand was laid on his arm, and he turned in surprise to see the sheriff.

"Beg pardon, Mr. Murchison, but here's a subpoena for you." At Murchison's amazement the official explained: "There's a trial going on up-stairs in the Superior Court. Mr. King noticed you riding up, and summoned you as a character witness for his client, Clint Dusenberry. Just take you a minute or two to testify, sir."

Annoyed, Murchison consented to the inevitable. This was the first request Poge King had made of him, and he remembered with kindness that, as a grocer's clerk, Clint Dusenberry had always looked the other way when the boys had hooked a handful of peanuts.

Entering the court-room, he was surprised to find it crowded. The issue involved was an alleged fraud in a horse-trade, in which many local people were acutely interested. The jury seemed to have been drawn from the upper end of the county, for the faces were all unfamiliar to Murchison.

He was sworn, and took his seat in the witness-box. In reply to King's questions, he stated that he had known Mr. Dusen-

berry ever since he was a boy, and had always liked him; that he had renewed the acquaintance casually since he had been at home; and that to the best of his knowledge and belief, Dusenberry had always borne a good character.

He answered a few more stereotyped questions as to the good name of Mr. Dusenberry. Then King said he had finished with the witness, and turned him over for cross-examination to the attorney for the prosecution.

Krider's voice was so resonant that it seemed as if it must be housed in his large, bulging forehead rather than in his undersized body.

"Mr. Murchison," bellowed Krider, "do you reside in Constantinople or Cairo?"

The jury leaned forward to a man. None of them had ever before seen a man who hailed from Egypt or Turkey, and most of them thought vaguely of Constantinople as a word used in spelling-bees.

"I have lived in both cities, but I am now a resident of Coopertown in this county."

"Were you working in Cairo before you came here?"

"Yes, until the last two years, when I have been in London."

"Who hired you there?"

"I was employed by the Universal Tobacco Company."

"So you were hand in glove with the Tobacco Trust, were you?"

"I stated that I was with the Universal Tobacco Company."

"The Soopreme Court decided it was a trust," said Krider menacingly. "Do you deny that?"

"I do not."

"They dissolved it because it was crippin' the tobacco-farmers, underminin' the whole tobacco business, and drivin' small warehousemen to the wall, until the men at the top could smoke fifty-cent cigars, while the farmers who labored and sweated were lucky if they could afford a five-cent plug to chew. Do you deny that?"

"I do not know which part of your speech I am called upon to affirm or to deny."

The lawyer appealed to the judge, who said:

"Answer the question, Mr. Murchison."

"I think statistics will prove that the profits of tobacco-farmers compare favorably with those who grow other crops."

"That ain't the question, your honor, and the witness knows it ain't. I asked if the Soopreme Court didn't dissolve the trust, and would they have done it if they hadn't known its dealings were crooked and were throttlin' trade."

"My personal conviction is at variance with their decision."

Krider rolled his eyes upward.

"So you set your opinions against the highest try-bunal in the land? So you come out fair and square on the side of trusts?"

"Your honor, this is entirely immaterial," interposed King, seeing how dubiously the jurymen were regarding his witness.

Murchison was the first man they had ever seen who didn't believe that when low prices prevailed for hogs, corn, cotton, or tobacco it was due to an occult menace called a trust; and that when they had to pay high for any commodity, it was the work of the same unseen power.

Krider defended his course with a lofty outburst of indignation.

"Your honor, it is material to the case. The whole issue hangs on a question of veracity between Mr. Dusenberry and my client. It is my dooty to find out what facts I can as to the character of the witness the defense brings to prove the character of their client. Here's a county full of folks that have known Clint Dusenberry all his life, and they bring a man from Turkey to testify! How long have you been living in Coopertown, Mr. Murchison?"

"Two months."

"How often have you seen Dusenberry in that time?"

"Four or five times—perhaps oftener."

"And before that you hadn't seen him but once or twice in twenty years?"

"Yes."

"No reports as to Mr. Dusenberry were circulatin' around in Constantinople, were they?"

"Naturally not."

"Then how do you undertake to testify as to the character of a man you haven't known anything about for practically twenty years?"

"I said it was good as far as I knew."

"You said as long as you had known him it was good—quite a different matter."

"Well, that was the impression I intended to convey."

"Will you please say what you mean, and not intend to convey impressions? How old were you when you left home?"

"I was twenty."

"Do you consider that a chap of twenty can have an impression of a man's character that is of any value?"

Nettled at the acerbity of Krider's tone, Murchison replied unwisely.

"I think the intuitions of youth are often of more value than the opinions of a maturer man, who is swayed more or less unconsciously by self-interest."

"Of course, if you think a fresh boy of twenty has more judgment than a mature, ripe mind, then there's nothing more to be said on that score." Most of the jurors were elderly, and nodded in agreement. "So when you were twenty, you knew more than older men; and when you were older yourself, you knew more than the Soopreme Court?"

"You need not answer that question, Mr. Murchison," directed the judge.

"What did you do when you left Coopertown, Mr. Murchison?" Krider proceeded to inquire.

"I went to the State capital, to accept a small clerkship in the Internal Revenue Office."

Again the jury quivered with interest. For twenty-five years before, the collector of internal revenue had been a "dyed-in-the-wool radical," and a place in his office a blot on a man's escutcheon.

"So you were what one of the great men in the Democratic party in this State called a red-legged grasshopper?"

"I recall the term."

"Then how did you jump from being a revenue-doodler to Turkey? It's some distance even for a grasshopper. Sultan send for you?"

The youngest jurymen snickered audibly. Again the judge said that Mr. Murchison need not answer the question until its form was amended.

"A friend of my father's made an opening for me in one of the New York offices of the Universal Tobacco Company, and two years later I was transferred to the Constantinople branch."

III

MURCHISON'S rise had been a typically American one. Beginning with a small place in the Universal, which owed a large measure of its success to the fact that it

recognized and rewarded efficiency, he had been sent over to Constantinople when the purchasing department there was in its infancy.

In a year or two the head of the office broke down, and young Murchison was put in to fill his place temporarily. Then the company found that it had a man who fully understood the situation. Murchison had to handle very large sums of money, and to deal with difficult financial and technical problems. Later on he was sent to extend the still more important Egyptian branch. When he wanted a year's leave of absence, there was no one who could take his place at the time; so, in spite of an attack of fever and real need of rest, he stayed on, and the company rewarded his services.

In the years that had passed, the investments of his savings had so increased in value that now his holdings spelled ease and comfort for the rest of his life. For two years he had been in London, in close touch with the company's great European and Asiatic business. With all his inner knowledge of work well done, it was galling to have a pert little whippersnapper demand:

"Were you called upon to testify in the case of the Universal Tobacco Company, or did you make your pile by holding your tongue?"

"Perhaps the ability to keep a civil tongue had something to do with it," returned Murchison suavely.

Krider, like all cheap bullies, resented an implied criticism. He had been holding his trump-card up his sleeve, and his voice fairly resounded through the court-room as he asked:

"Mr. Murchison, when was it that you said you would give a thousand dollars to know how a poor man feels?"

There was an immediate sensation. The jury seemed electrified by the shock; a murmur of indignation rippled through the court-room. A half-intoxicated man in the rear, who arose and demanded a hearing, was ejected by the sheriff.

"You need not answer that question, Mr. Murchison," ruled the judge.

But Murchison did not want his protection.

"I never made that remark, nor anything remotely resembling it."

"Maybe it was in Turkish or Egyptian money, Mr. Murchison?"

"The whole statement is an utter fabrication."

"Do you deny that you said you'd rather be a nigger than poor white trash?"

"The question is too fatuous to be worth denial."

"Mr. Murchison, it's street talk all over Coopertown that you bragged that you'd give a thousand dollars to know how a poor man felt. If you didn't say it, you must have said something mighty like it, and I ask you to state quietly to the jury just what you did say."

Murchison lost his temper.

"Don't point your dirty little forefinger at me and reiterate a statement which I have already denounced as a lie!"

The judge rapped for order. With a show of forbearance, Krider said:

"As the witness cannot control his temper, and as I don't care to see any man committed for contempt of court, he may stand aside. It seems he isn't makin' money in Dill County by keeping that civil tongue, so I guess he keeps his good manners for Wall Street!"

It was the final stab at Murchison's character—already black enough in the eyes of that jury. Wall Street, in their minds, was indissolubly associated with a portly man in a waistcoat dotted with dollar-marks who booted the "common people" out of the door.

IV

As Murchison left the court-room, he was sensible of hostile eyes and unfriendly comments.

"Who cares for the good opinion of a bunch of loafers?" he thought; yet something within him *hurt*.

As he stopped by the register's office to get his hat and riding-crop, King came in. His face was gloomy.

"The jury decided against Clint without leaving their seats," he announced.

"Too bad!" commented Murchison dryly.

He was feeling sore about the way he had been manhandled. He considered that King, who had drawn him into the difficulty, had failed to protect him.

"Oh, I know it's nothing to you!" King spoke with bitterness. "But it'll be easier to skin an eel than to get a cent out of Dusenberry now. That scrap you and Krider got into killed my whole case. I thought a man of your experience could

handle a little shyster like Krider, but I suppose you thought it wasn't worth your trouble."

"Well, upon my soul!" began Murchison angrily.

He stopped short, arrested by the fact that Pogey's coat was patched with material of a different kind. A mouse had chosen to gnaw so conspicuous a place as the lapel of his salt-and-pepper suit, and his wife had patched it with a bit of black alpaca. It appealed to Murchison as no words could have done.

"I'm sorry if my testimony lost your case, Pogey. I'll send a check for whatever old Clint owes you, and you can return it when he pays you."

King turned a dull red.

"I don't want your charity!" he said.

Without another word Murchison left the room. The crowd was pouring out of the court-house at the same time, and he was irritated by the way several men deliberately jostled him. As he reached the bottom of the steps the drunken man who had been put out of the court-room lurched against him.

"So you'd give a thousand dollars to know how a poor man feels? Well, I won't charge you nothin' to show you how a poor man's *jist* feels!"

The unexpected blow knocked Murchison to the ground. He staggered to his feet and made a blind rush at his assailant. His primal rage gave him power to deliver a fiercer blow than he had received.

The crowd surged about them and parted them; but public sympathy was entirely

with the drunken man. Murchison mounted his horse and rode off in silence. He was savagely glad that his adversary's nose and lip were bleeding, but he was sore over the scene in the court-room, and chilled at the lack of faith which seemed to meet him at every turn.

"They all seem to think I've an ax to grind somewhere. Why, I've more real friends in that one old sky-scraper in New York than I have in the whole of Dill County!" A thought swept over him with a sense of emancipation. "*I don't have to stay here!*"

His man met him at the door and looked at him in consternation.

"Why, Mr. Murchison, your cheek is cut! I hope you didn't get a fall, sir? This telegram came, but I didn't know where to find you."

The message was a certain simple formula of an invitation to lunch, which, to the initiated, meant a conference of major importance. The summons exhilarated Murchison like an elixir.

"We shall have to catch the six o'clock train for New York, Withers. Pack up everything. We won't be back soon, unless I bring a party down at Thanksgiving for a shot at the birds!"

Whistling like a boy, he went to his desk and wrote an order for a bronze hitching-post.

"It's a sort of thank-offering because I don't have to stay hitched here myself!" he thought.

With this declaration of freedom, he contentedly slipped back into harness.
